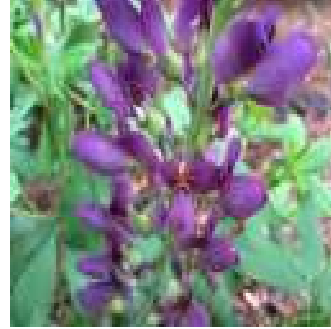


Baptisia australis (Blue Wild Indigo)

Botanical Bytes
By Gregory Bruner

Foliage Height: 3'-4'
Foliage Width: 3'-4'
Flower Height: 4'-5'
Foliage Color: Green / Blue
Flower Color: Blue / Purple
USDA Hardiness: 3-9
Moisture: Average - Dry
Light: Full Sun - Part Sun



Baptisia australis is an excellent choice for almost any sunny garden. Few plants are so well behaved, having the strong presence to be the backbone of a garden while being baked in the heat of the July sun. The native range of this awesome leafy garden member stretches North to Vermont, west to Kansas, and south into Georgia.

Blue Wild Indigo has a plethora of common names—each of them adopted for a good reason. Blue False Indigo, Rattlepod, Rattlebush, and Rattlebush Wild Indigo are a few of the more colorfully descriptive.

Blue False Indigo is not the same as the True Indigo (*Indigofera tinctoria*) used in dyes. However, before True Indigos were introduced to the dyeing industry of North America, *Baptisia* was used as a dye by American Indians and settlers. *Baptisia* originates from the Greek word *bapto*, which means to dip or to dye. Rattlepod and Rattlebush are both very descriptive of the seedpods once dried. The flower spikes transform into black seedpods containing small pea-shaped seeds. The pods rattle in the wind or when shaken. American Indian children were known to use the stalks of seedpods as rattles.

Woodland edges and open prairies are where *Baptisia* originally roamed. It enjoys the sunniest garden locations and is amazingly drought resistant thanks to an impressive taproot. This taproot makes moving an established *Baptisia* very difficult. *Baptisia* prefers sandy well-drained soils but tolerates a wide variety of soil conditions. Because it is in the legume family, it is also a nitrogen fixer, which should be welcome in any garden. I have personally witnessed this robust critter endure temperatures of -20 to -30 degrees Fahrenheit, adding to its impressive resume.

Baptisia australis appears to be as healthy as a well-behaved gorilla when garden survival is mentioned, but what about flowers? Sometime between March and July, depending on your region, 10"-12" spikes of dark blue awesomeness will rocket out of the 3' mass of calming bluish-green foliage. These sapphire spikes of beauty will last for 3-6 weeks, and then the stems with seedpods can be used in floral arrangements.

Alkaloids produced in *Baptisia* are actually toxic to many insects, which makes it surprising that a number of butterfly larvae use it as a food source. Birds and furry critters also enjoy the large seeds in the Winter. Bumblebees are the main pollinators, and it is fun to see them buzzing around pretty blue columns of flowers. Deer seldom bother its foliage or flowers, which is a bonus on top of its other wonderful characteristics.

American Indians learned that *Baptisia* had many medicinal uses. Hot teas were ingested as purgatives, while cold teas helped with vomiting. Root poultices were applied as an anti-inflammatory; pulverized roots were applied to sore teeth for pain relief.

Baptisia australis is a well-behaved, tough as nails, drought-resistant, attractive flowering backbone of any sunny garden. It is an excellent combination of size and beauty that will not overrun the smaller members of your leafy garden family. Have a hot dry spot? Definitely give this one a try.